

What Happened in Carnoustie

by Kate Strain

Commissioned by Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, for *A Leisure Complex*, a publication to document Dennis McNulty's performance work of the same name, which was one of the *All Sided Games* series of commissions.

The easiest way to do this is to tell you what happened. Because things happened. Each at a certain moment, in a specific way, one after the other. Probably many more things than those which I perceived happening happened. But the ones that happened to me are the ones I'm best placed to describe.

I entered a leisure centre late in the evening. Outside darkness. Some shrubbery. An entrance door around the corner. I was glad to be out of the wind. Carnoustie is a coastal town. The wind is really in your face. Indoors was too-bright and evidently often used. A well-worn foyer floor. Notice boards with tennis team timetabling and swim hats for sale in case you forgot yours. Also some very distinctive floral displays that I can only guess have been brought in by some green-fingered horticulturalist especially for the performance.

There were people I didn't recognise, smiling at me or chatting amongst themselves. One took my name and handed me a rectangular grey bar of extremely lightweight material. Not knowing what it was, I put it in my pocket for safekeeping. My glasses were fogged up and speckled with rain so I headed for the bathrooms to tidy my face. I accidentally walked into the darkness of an empty changing room. After faffing around for a bit, I regrouped with the group of over a dozen who had been collecting beside the vending machines. I chatted awkwardly to people I didn't know. After the exact right amount of time a stranger, who looked like she knew what she was doing, raised her voice above ours and beckoned us this way. We gladly relinquished conversational duties and followed singularly, but together, as a group. I guess we were the audience.

I wasn't sure what to expect. I had heard tell of Dennis McNulty's performance works before. In fact I had been given step-by-step accounts of them by on-the-scene witnesses. The way they were always described was as a sequence of events. And so that's the way I imagined stepping into one. This happened, then this happened, then this happened. But the difference now was that it was happening to me – first hand. I couldn't help but feel implicated in the performative swing of things. The first room into which we were ushered was dark and rectangular. I tried to notice things like the height of the ceiling and the fabric of the floor. But I was distracted by my own careful manoeuvres to stand outside of what I imagined might be the space where something might happen – that is to say, I was deeply entrenched in avoiding the point in the room where I thought the next phase of action might unfold. The group, of maybe two-dozen people or so, formed a natural kind of oval shape in the space. Most people faced the centre of this cell-like circle. I dallied around the edges trying not to catch the light. At a certain moment, a curtain opened.

What I thought had been a regular side-wall was in fact a stage curtain. Heavy, velvet, you know the type. It split and slid sideways to reveal a stage – not beyond it – but within it. The rectangular room upon which we the audience had gathered, was in fact the stage. We re-oriented accordingly. We looked out across a dimly lit sports hall. It felt familiar like childhood dance-halls or school gyms or scenes from movies I can't remember or American high-school encounters I can remember but which never actually happened to me. I pushed myself to the front of the stage to get a full view. It was beautiful, spread out under us like that in the low-light. My eyes drifted around the room to settle on a teenage girl, standing alone, just to the right of the centre of the hall, wearing roller skates. Her hair is short and she has on a belly top and sweat pants. She skates over to a flat-screen TV on a stand, and plugs it in to turn it on. The monitor flickers with a hexagonal shape, moving and morphing against a blue background. The girl glides back to her original spot. A light lifts up the contours of her frame and I can see that she is tapping a rhythm and rolling her feet to a beat that I just now realise I can hear. She stays where she is, but moves to the music. Now I see there's a spotlight. I also see, on this vast sporting court, there's a spotlight operator. Maybe the music changes, but a familiar song pans into my zone of recognition. *One More Kiss, Dear*. The skater begins to dance – to move away from that one spot. It's with a kind of magnetic energy now.

It's a routine. It's the 1920s, or the 1950s. Maybe the 80s? It's a dance-hall. It's wildly romantic and nostalgic and somehow heartbreaking enough to avoid being kitsch. Maybe more like a memory of a thing happening than a thing actually happening right now. I follow the dancer with my eyes and think about how like a David Lynch movie this feels. Only more so, because here I am, in it. The spotlight shadows her every move. She spins and makes spirals and delicate well-timed butterfly-jumps. I trail her movements across the multi-layered markings that constitute the different sporting layouts. The halfway line, the three-quarter line, all the other lines and dots and dashes that are there for reasons beyond my reach. She glides over the whole thing like glass. And the nicest part of all is that she's not even showy. She might actually be a little nervous. In a way this timid air is probably intentional. I can only guess at that. But it feels so cosy and so strange at once. At a certain moment the spotlight leaves the girl, and creeps up along the sports hall wall, right up to the ceiling, which is cut and quartered by impossible beams. I follow the ball of light up there, dancing around the joints and arcs. The girl continues to swirl and cross-curve below. I register a general feeling of contentment.

It's easy, I've been told, to make a whole audience feel one thing. What's difficult, apparently, is to create a situation where everyone in the audience can have a different reaction to the same thing happening on stage. I think this is what separates McNulty's promenade works from more identifiably theatrical performances. In ways I read his choreographed ambulations more like dream-sequences through which you are lead, or the storyboard for a film, where you play the part of the movie camera. There's an element of feeling like this thing has not been made for you, but that you happen to be there having it happen in front of you. This is a very nice feeling of inconsequentiality or perhaps more specifically, invisibility. Being privy to someone's clever and careful orchestral manoeuvres.

At a certain moment the music was no longer playing and the curtain was slowly closing. Maybe a door opened, or a light went on, or someone guided us, in any case we understood that we should move to the next location. We left the stage through a side-door, down some steps, through some equipment storage rooms, and out into the cold dark night. The skating girl whizzed past us and we clunkily followed the person who beckoned us into another arena. Another sports-hall, this one with bleachers set up in the centre of the court. We walked towards them, mounted them, sat on them, and watched.

In front of us, a woman is at work at a table. She's doing something crafty and engrossing with sellotape and isolated measures of pencil lead. My hand in my pocket feels for the grey stick I was handed before this whole thing began, and I realise that it's pencil lead or graphite, which is also the purest form of coal. The woman is addressing us. Telling us about the last time she was here in this sports-hall. It was to record a TV show apparently. Her Dad, it turns out, used to work for the BBC, and they came here in the 90's to shoot an episode of the Antiques Road Show. Locals brought their treasure, hoping for news from the experts that their junk was their fortune. One woman brought a large black Victorian table. The presenter asked her if she knew what it was made of? "Coal" she exalts, like a good student. "Parrot coal" says the expert. A video of this exact extract from the Antiques Road Show is projected onto a large screen back-dropping the speaker. As the footage plays she moves out of sight, and we watch in the warmth of familiarity as the expert antique dealer tells the regular Joe Soap that she's in fact in possession of a priceless artefact made of a unique material of almost magical properties, and valued at over forty thousand pounds.

The speaker returns, making gestures as she speaks. Her Dad used to tell her, she says, about how marvellous things can come from mundane things. About how some things are always there and have been all along. We just have to find them. It's touching. Another video, this one describing a substance called graphene, plays on the screen. Graphene is a recently discovered super-material. It comes from graphite, like the little bar I'm holding in my hand in my pocket. People know where it is, and what it can do. You can make small amounts of it by sticking sellotape onto graphite, but a solution for mass-producing the wonder-substance has not yet been achieved. But some day it will be. And then we'll be making things from coal again, says the speaker. Her circling hand gestures are making sense. I'm thinking about glitches in the Matrix. She must have planted this idea, surely. At a certain moment, we're off!

We plod en masse into a squash-court bathed in red light. Here a guitarist with an electric guitar plugged into an extension socket is strumming in the corner. An image moves across the width of the walls, tracking lines and markings, those of this room I'm guessing. It reminds me of a road movie, but splayed out across the floor. In real life, the guitarist plays something I think I should recognise. I'm lured into a gently rockabilly sway, and I look around the room. Some people know this song for sure; others are completely bemused, not just at the sound and the visuals, but at the very fact of their own presence in this scenario. I get the good feeling, before we move to a canteen area where a spread of funereal fare is laid before us like a harvest offering.

The food is getting my attention. The group politely congregate around the laden tables and I hover near the trays of sandwiches. One woman (was she the guide?) raises a cup to the cafetière. This is a signal, we can eat. I guess the performance is over. I gingerly fill my fists with little triangular sandwiches and try to stand somewhere inconspicuous. There's tea too, and coffee, and cake, and fruit. A splendid ending to a wondrous series of events, I think. I decide between tuna and egg salad. Suddenly I hear music. Loud and friendly and familiar and coming from behind closed doors – there are lights too – disco lights! *Been working, so hard*, the double doors open into yet another hall, and inside a lone teenager is warming up for a dance. I hear the familiar rhythm of a Kenny Loggins classic, but it's not quite getting to the bits I'm expecting. The teenager is wearing black spandex with pink highlights. She looks like an extra from *Fame*, but the leg-warmers might be my own invention. Amidst the crowd of embarrassed nibblers and snack-collectors, caught unawares while biting into their cucumber sandwiches, the teenage girl launches into the centre of the room, and starts to rehearse her routine. An upbeat, hi-energy number; the performer knows all the moves in the sequence, and goes through them duly. There is something incredibly awkward about this arrangement of people. The parish picnic helps the scene along and suddenly I'm back at the school disco. Remembering all those things that never even happened. Again.